

**Innovative Designs for Persistently Low-Performing Schools:
Transforming Failing Schools by Addressing Poverty-Related Barriers to Teaching and Learning**

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The Role of Poverty: The Key to Unlocking the Problems of, and Solutions for, Failing Schools

In announcing his vision of “A Great Society” in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson succinctly captured the crucial relationship between poverty and education: “Poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty.”ⁱⁱ A year later, the most significant source of federal support for K-12 education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), passed as part of Johnson’s War on Poverty. In the near half-century since the passage of ESEA, one of the strongest and most consistent themes in American discourse has been the power of education to provide a pathway out of poverty and into the middle class. And indeed, it has: educational attainment is strongly linked to economic success; and the gap in earning power between educated and less-educated workers has been growing dramatically since the 1980s.ⁱⁱⁱ Nevertheless, Johnson’s emphasis on the role poverty plays in impeding educational success has largely been ignored in current education reform debate. Today, all across America, poverty does in fact present a bar to learning. The effects of poverty will undoubtedly continue to undermine our nation’s ability to effectively educate our children if these effects are not fully understood and directly addressed in the design of high poverty schools. Indeed, it is in understanding and addressing the effects of poverty that both the problems of, and solutions for, persistently low performing schools and the intractable drop out problem lie.

In this paper we argue that solutions for transforming persistently low-performing, high poverty schools into centers of academic excellence lie in addressing head-on the poverty-related barriers to learning, teaching, and school organization. Valuable insights can be gained from analyses of the innovative outliers -- the small but powerful number of high performing/high poverty schools that show that zip code does not determine student destiny -- about what high poverty schools need to succeed. Seminal studies of such schools have produced compelling evidence of the “essential elements” of highly effective, high poverty schools. These include high levels of accountability, impactful leadership, effective teaching, a positive learning culture, extended learning time, and service integration. Highly effective charters and school management organizations are leading examples of whole-school approaches that incorporate many of the “essential elements” within a given school -- particularly the crucial “essential element” of creating a profound school culture shift that establishes effective conditions for learning. However, notwithstanding these remarkable innovations, the problem remains that the vast majority of high poverty public schools are left untouched and millions of high poverty children are left undereducated.

This paper offers the Turnaround for Children (TFC) model as an example of a scalable solution for high poverty public schools that recognizes the effects of poverty on students, staff, and school functioning, addresses those barriers to learning, and creates a school culture that provides the necessary conditions for effective teaching, learning and academic achievement. The TFC model posits that if high poverty schools develop the capacity to address poverty-related barriers to learning, and if this capacity-building and culture change is coupled with what has been learned from other innovative models (about effective leadership and teaching, extended learning time, and the need for common core standards), then widespread, scalable, and

sustainable system reform in America's lowest performing public schools is truly possible. Such transformation can put our nation back on the path to achieving ESEA's original vision -- in which poverty is no longer a bar to learning, and a quality education offers all of our nation's children an escape from poverty.

A Nation in Crisis: The Costs of Rampant School Failure

The vast number of failing schools across America represents a national crisis. Approximately 30% of schools nationwide are considered chronically underperforming^{iv}, and 6.2 million youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are dropouts. In many communities, this number represents nearly 1 in 5 men. Among female dropouts, 40% become teen mothers, and 64% of children born to unmarried teenage high school dropouts live in poverty. This failure of so many public schools to provide a compelling, quality education undermines our national obligation to all children and exacts enormous economic and social costs. Compared to graduates, high school dropouts are four times more likely to be unemployed. Cutting the number of dropouts in half would generate \$45 billion annually in tax revenue. School failure devastates America's global competitiveness. From the 1960s to 2006, the United States fell from 1st to 18th out of 24 industrialized nations in high school graduation rates. Closing the achievement gap with other nations could have increased the 2008 Gross Domestic Product by \$2.3 trillion. The social costs of school dropouts are equally troubling, with the "school to prison pipeline" serving as one staggering example. Dropouts are 8 times more likely to be incarcerated than high school graduates; 82% of those in prison are high school dropouts; and states spend more than \$44 billion per year on incarceration costs. The critical importance of addressing school failure, and its attendant social and economic consequences, simply cannot be overstated.

The Role of Poverty in Underperforming Schools

The problem of underperforming schools is firmly rooted in the relationship between poverty and school failure. The preponderance of the nation's failing schools are located in high poverty urban neighborhoods,^v communities afflicted by a host of social problems: unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse, community violence, domestic violence, child abuse, teen pregnancy, incarcerated parents, community inefficacy. Students in high poverty communities have a disproportionate number of serious health, mental health and behavioral problems; high poverty families often lack the social capital to advocate for their children; and poor urban neighborhoods lack adequate resources to address the profound level of need. One recent New York City study showed that fewer than 10% of the poorest children requiring mental health services are receiving them; and of those enrolled in services, over 50% are classified as having serious emotional disturbances.^{vi}

Children do not leave the problems of high poverty communities at the school-yard gate. The effects of poverty serve as barriers to learning, as children living in poverty and exposed to trauma all too often come to school sad, distracted, disruptive, and disengaged.^{vii} High poverty schools, however, are not designed to address this myriad of issues that affect learning; and even the best teachers are not trained and skilled to address the effects of this level of adversity on academic instruction. In these schools, classes are often derailed from instruction by disruption and frequent disciplinary crises. In an average school, 1 - 7% of the students exhibit serious levels of disruptive behaviors and disciplinary needs, while 5 - 15% exhibit less severe behaviors that nevertheless require considerable individual attention. In high poverty urban schools, as many as 54% of students fall into the upper tiers requiring intense and/or targeted services.^{viii}

When student need is at such an overwhelming level, the high-need students become powerful negative socializing influences, contributing to disrupted learning environments, less time spent on task, and lower academic achievement for all students. Moreover, because schools are unprepared to address these needs, staff responses (such as detentions and suspensions) are often punitive or exclusionary. These practices exacerbate existing problems by creating more time out of class, promoting student disengagement from learning, and propelling students farther down the path of dropping out.^{ix} Finally, lacking the systems and skills to succeed, school staff become resigned and demoralized, creating a spiral of disempowerment that fuels absenteeism and turnover and further undermines efforts at reform.

High poverty schools thus persistently fail because the problems of children living in poverty are not adequately addressed on multiple fronts: they are not adequately addressed in the community; they are not adequately addressed in the school; and they are not adequately addressed in the classroom. It therefore comes as no surprise that schools in communities with enormous stressors and scarce resources are far less likely to gain traction for reforms and develop essential supports for learning that improve student academic achievement.^x As a group of leading researchers concluded when observing truly disadvantaged schools:

At both the classroom and the school level, the good efforts of even the best of educators are likely to be seriously taxed when confronted with a high density of students who are in foster care, homeless, neglected, abused and so on. Classroom activity can understandably get diverted toward responding to these manifest personal needs. Similarly it can get difficult at the school level to maintain collective attention on instructional improvement when the social needs of children continue to cry out for adult attention. It is easy to see how the core work of instruction and its improvement can quickly become a secondary focus.^{xi}

The effects of poverty thus create a devastating cascade of systems failures in high poverty schools. The solution, we contend, is to reverse systemic failure at its root through the re-design of high poverty schools so that they have the capacities to tenaciously confront poverty-related barriers to teaching and learning and enable the academic success of all students.

From Model to School Design

The avalanche of school systems failure has prompted two distinct responses among policy-makers, academics, and practitioners. The first camp, led by advocates of a “Broader, Bolder Approach to Education,”^{xii} argues that the association between poverty and low student achievement is so powerful that policies must directly address these disadvantages in parallel to a school-improvement agenda. They thus emphasize the need for expanded community services, including early childhood education, health services, after-school programs, and extended school days. Certainly, services for students are critically important, but “service models” too often work at the fringes, fail to effect school change, and lose sight of how services must support a school’s core educational mission. On the other side of the debate are entities, such as the Education Equality Project, arguing that success is only possible if schools are held accountable for the achievement of all students, and that all decisions about staffing and resources must be made with the sole purpose of meeting students’ academic needs. Proponents of this approach emphasize recruiting and equipping high-quality teachers, principals, and administrators and removing any who are ineffective. Yet, while accountability, leadership, and teaching

innovation are clearly vital, they often fail to accomplish sufficient results because they fail to address poverty-related barriers that can derail even the most effective educators who are unprepared for the depth of challenge in high poverty schools.^{xiii} We therefore advocate a third approach.

Widespread, sustainable school transformation success, we argue, is only possible when a school, as a whole, has the capacities to respond to and remove poverty-related barriers to leadership, teaching, and learning; to build those capacities school-wide; and thereby create a new culture that supports excellent teaching and successful learning. This must be the work of every staff member in the school -- not just a few teachers or social workers. Moreover, fundamental change in school culture and climate can serve to potentiate the other elements of successful school reform. Put simply, if a school “gets the culture piece right,” it is far more likely that leaders can lead, teachers can teach, and students can learn.

The Turnaround for Children (TFC) whole-school model offers a scalable solution for high poverty public schools that recognizes the effects of poverty on learning, teaching, and school design; addresses those barriers to learning head-on; and by so doing, builds a school culture that provides the necessary conditions for learning and academic achievement. The TFC model contends that if high poverty schools develop this capacity -- through creating school-wide systems, integrating vital community services, and building staff skills -- and if this capacity-building is coupled with what we have learned from other innovative models (e.g., about effective leadership, quality teaching, extended learning, service integration, and the need for common core standards), then widespread, scalable, and sustainable system reform in our lowest performing public schools is truly possible. Such a transformation can put our nation back on the path to achieving ESEA’s original vision -- where poverty is no longer a bar to learning, and a quality education offers all our nation’s children an escape from poverty.

Since 2005, TFC has worked in over 60 of the lowest performing public schools in New York City. TFC engages high poverty/low performing schools in a comprehensive three-year, on-site intervention that transforms the school from the inside out. The intervention begins by establishing a partnership with a principal committed to addressing both academic and non-academic barriers to student success and to creating effective conditions for learning. TFC then deploys a team of highly experienced educators and social workers -- including a *Project Director, Education Coach, Classroom Coach, and Social Work Consultant* -- to work with each partner school. Each school augments the external TFC team by hiring a *Student Support Social Worker (SSSW)*, who is in turn supported by highly skilled social work interns trained by TFC. The TFC intervention focuses on building school capacity in three areas: establishing school-wide *systems*, integrating student support *services*, and building staff *skills*.

Comprehensive student support *systems* are introduced through three problem-solving teams that focus on behavior, academics and school climate. The *Student Intervention Team (SIT)* assumes care management for students at the highest level of behavioral and social need who often disrupt and derail classroom instruction and require the intervention of outside providers. The *SIT* reviews highest-risk students’ needs, and develops and monitors intervention plans for in-school counseling and referral to outside services. The TFC model focuses on the most challenging students first because we recognize that a small percentage of extremely high-need students can be so negatively charismatic that they destroy a school culture and make it virtually impossible for teachers to teach and students to learn. As in a public health schema, identifying and intervening intensively with those at highest need or risk is critical not just for those individuals, but for the entire population of students. Indeed, our experience has

demonstrated the immediate and stunning effect on school culture and morale that results from provision of services to the minority of powerfully disruptive and needy students. The *Instructional Support Team (IST)* supports students whose needs are more academic in nature and can be met through school- and classroom-based resources and strategies. The *IST* identifies academically at-risk students, coordinates care and intervention strategies with staff members, and provides professional development for teachers. By doing this work effectively, the *IST* prevents inappropriate referrals to special education and ensures the continued academic progress of students who would otherwise be at risk of failure or dropping out. The final *Core Team* operates at the whole-school level and focuses on overall school safety and culture, disciplinary codes and behavioral norms, classroom practices, and family engagement. This team's mission is to create and sustain a healthy, vibrant school environment.

At the same time it launches school-wide *systems*, the TFC model establishes pathways to student support *services* in the school and in the community. Each TFC partner school hires an experienced *Student Support Social Worker (SSSW)*, trained by TFC's mental health experts, who serves as a first responder for crisis intervention, counsels students, develops school-wide programs, and helps lead the *SIT*. The *SSSW* also arranges for a community-based agency to be the school's Primary Mental Health Partner, develops critical linkages between the school and community-based child-servicing systems, connects high-need students with appropriate services, and serves as a liaison between the school and families. By serving as a member of the school community, accepted and trusted by both students and families, the *SSSW* reduces issues of stigma and access.

Finally, the TFC model provides teachers and administrators with targeted training in the highly specific classroom-based *skills* needed for success in high-poverty schools. These skills -- defusing disruption, de-escalating crises, identifying early warning signs, working with diverse learners, and mastering classroom organization and management practices -- are essential but commonly lacking in standard teacher training. Providing school staff with the skills for gaining control over and altering disruptive behaviors frees school leaders from constant crisis management and enables teachers to maintain orderly classrooms and spend more time on academic instruction.

Thus, the TFC model works at the individual, classroom, and whole-school levels and enables the entire school to organize for action against adversity. The result of the TFC intervention is a profound shift in school culture and performance. Schools characterized by disorder and violence become calm and safe. Punitive disciplinary practices are replaced with effective strategies that defuse trouble before it escalates. High-need students receive effective services, and inappropriate referrals to Special Education decrease markedly. Principals who were floundering emerge as highly effective leaders, and teachers who were failing to connect with students spend more time on-task and blossom into successful educators. Excuses for poor performance disappear as a culture of accountability takes root throughout the school building.

This culture shift produces compelling academic and non-academic outcomes. Data from TFC elementary and middle schools in New York City in 2005-2009 showed dramatic gains in math and English scores. The percentage of students at or above grade-level proficiency in math rose from 49% to 82% (elementary) and 24% to 64% (middle); and English language arts proficiency increased from 47% to 57% (elementary) and 27% to 49% (middle). In addition, a three-year independent evaluation of five TFC schools in 2008 showed a 51% decrease in police reported incidents, a 32% decrease in suspensions, a 77% decrease in teacher turnover, and a 34% decrease in teacher absences. In addition, annual rates of in-school counseling rose

dramatically and students in counseling self-reported less time spent with “deviant” peers, and more readiness for the social and academic challenges of high school.

Over the course of the three-year intervention, a new culture emerges throughout the school, so that the intervention’s effects are sustainable and “owned” by the school. Moreover, at a cost of \$200,000 per school/per year, the model is ripe for scale and replication. TFC’s goal, however, is not simply to serve as a model program that schools may choose to adopt. Rather, success will be achieved when all high poverty schools are mandated and designed to have the capacities in place to remove poverty-related barriers to teaching and learning and thereby establish an effective school culture for academic achievement.

Lessons from Innovative Outliers

This vision of success has been captured by a small number of schools and is supported by academic research. Valuable insights can be gained from analyses of the innovative outliers - the small but powerful number of high performing/high poverty schools -- about what high poverty schools need to succeed. Seminal studies of such schools, including those by The University of Chicago’s Consortium on Chicago School Research^{xiv} and Mass Insight Education and Research Institute,^{xv} have produced compelling evidence of the “essential elements” of highly effective high poverty schools. In the Chicago study, researchers identify a system of “essential supports” that contribute to success of high poverty schools, and conclude that leadership is the driving force of school improvement, with a strong leader characterized as one adept at management, instruction, and constructive engagement of staff, students, and families. The school leader is supported by four subsystems: instructional guidance (i.e., a demanding, coherently aligned curriculum supported by appropriate strategies, materials and tools); professional capacity (i.e., the human capital subsystem, from staff recruitment to professional development); parent-community-school ties (i.e., teachers developing an understanding of students’ backgrounds, and schools sustaining relationships with community services); and school learning climate (i.e., the establishment of safety and order, staff support, and a positive peer culture).

The Mass Insight study similarly examined the levers for success in high performing/high poverty schools and concluded that these outlier schools “are able to generate such high achievement because they confront, in specific, comprehensive, ongoing ways, the systemic effects of poverty on their students’ learning.”^{xvi} The study identifies the conditions, termed “*readiness*,” that schools must possess to ensure the academic success of their students: the readiness of school leaders to act, of teachers to teach, and of students to learn. To support the conditions of readiness, schools serving high poverty communities must have the capacity to “act against adversity” as it manifests in student needs; create a safe and orderly environment; support positive adult-student relationships; develop a strong and professional teaching staff who take responsibility for student achievement and who can effectively support the learning needs of high poverty students; and maintain leadership that addresses problems creatively.^{xvii}

What these and other studies have in common is an acknowledgement that solutions to underperforming schools must be comprehensive and well coordinated, and that the “essential elements” of successful transformation of high poverty schools go far beyond narrow technical solutions related to academics alone. Moreover, these studies clearly acknowledge the critical roles of school leadership, strong professional staff, extended learning opportunities, integrated services, as well as coherent curricula aligned to effective standards, assessments, and teaching tools. These essential elements have appropriately been the focus of many recent policy

initiatives and should continue to be. A host of innovative programs, including New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS), Teach for America (TFA), Citizen Schools (CS), and Communities in Schools (CIS), have made enormous strides in bringing some of the essential elements to bear in a number of high poverty schools: from impactful leadership (NLNS) and effective teaching (TFA), to extended learning (CS) and service integration (CIS).

However, other essential elements identified in the Chicago and Mass Insight studies have not been as universally acknowledged and consistently pursued, an oversight particularly problematic for high poverty schools. These primarily encompass systems of student support and the development of a productive climate for teaching and learning, including school-wide safety and order, well-managed classrooms, supportive adult-student relationships, a pro-social peer culture, collaborative family connections, and effective use of community services. These are equally essential to school success and cannot be separated from academics. Highly effective charters and school management organizations -- such as Mastery Charter Schools, AUSL, KIPP, Green Dot and Friends of Bedford -- provide isolated examples of whole-school approaches that produce high academic achievement and successfully incorporate a profound school culture shift that establishes effective conditions for learning. However, high performing charters and school management organizations reach only a small percentage of high poverty students. Many other charter schools fare no better than public schools in academic achievement; and even highly effective charters sometimes yield the unintended consequence of increasing concentrations of English language learners and Special Education students in already over-stressed public schools. Thus, notwithstanding these remarkable programs, the problem remains that the vast majority of high poverty public schools are left untouched and millions of children remain undereducated.

Implications for High Poverty School Reform Policy

While this paper offers the TFC model as an example of an intervention that can transform persistently failing schools, the larger opportunity is to design all schools in high poverty communities to succeed by ensuring that they have the systems, services and skills necessary to meet the needs of the students and families they serve. Increased understanding of the relationship between the effects of poverty and school failure, and the nature of effective responses, suggests the following policy recommendations:

1. Mandate the incorporation of systems of support, culture change, and service integration into all reform options (transformation, turnaround, alternative management, and restart) for high poverty schools and school districts.
2. Invest in the scaling of models that address systems of support, culture change, and service integration in high poverty schools.
3. Fund school-centered services for high poverty students and: (1) institutionalize the role of a school-based clinical social worker; (2) improve funding for evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies (e.g., counseling) that can preempt more expensive mental health interventions and Special Education classification; and (3) improve the integration of schools and child-serving systems by expanding public funding streams to cover current funding gaps (e.g., for case management, crisis intervention services, family outreach, and teacher consultation).

4. Provide adequate funding for interventions for children with intense needs (e.g., autism, developmental disabilities, severe mental health issues).

5. Promote the development of student support and climate measures that can be incorporated into accountability systems, and establish incentive structures that promote the adoption of school culture and climate improvement models.

6. Establish standards and provide funding for leader and teacher preparation that addresses poverty-related barriers in high poverty schools.

If our national education system is to fulfill the promise of providing a quality public education *and* an escape from poverty, then we must seriously address the poverty-related barriers to learning that are preventing our schools from leading the way out.

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